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ABSTRACT

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Starting School: Effective Transitions

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Abstract

This paper focuses on effective transition-to-school programs. Using a framework of 10 guidelines developed through the Starting School Research Project, it provides examples of effective strategies and transition programs. In this context, the nature of some current transition programs is questioned, and the curriculum of transition is problematized. In particular, issues are raised around who has input into such programs and who decides on appropriate curriculum.

Introduction

The Significance of Starting School

Starting school is an important time for young children, their families, and educators. It has been described as "one of the major challenges children have to face in their early childhood years" (Victorian Department of School Education, 1992, p. 44), "a big step for all children and their families" (New South Wales Department of School Education, 1997, p. 8), and "a key life cycle transition both in and outside school" (Pianta & Cox, 1999, p. xvii). Pianta and Kraft-Sayre (1999, p. 47) suggest that the transition to school "sets the tone and direction of a child's school career," while Christensen (1998) notes that transition to school has been described in the literature as a rite of passage associated with increased status and as a turning point in a child's life.

Whether or not these descriptions are accurate, they highlight the potential significance of a child's transition to school. In Kagan's (1999) words, starting school is a "big deal." It is clearly a key experience not only for the children starting school but also for educators—both in schools and in prior-to-school settings—and for their families. Bailey (1999, p. xv) summarizes the importance of this experience in the following way:

> Kindergarten is a context in which children make important conclusions about school as a

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> place where they want to be and about themselves as learners vis-a-vis schools. If no other objectives are accomplished, it is essential that the transition to school occur in such a way that children and families have a positive view of the school and that children have a feeling of perceived competence as learners.

An Ecological View of Transition

In an ecological model, "a child's transition to school is understood in terms of the influence of contexts (for example, family, classroom, community) and the connections among these contexts (e.g., family-school relationships) at any given time and across time" (Pianta, Rimm-Kaufman, & Cox, 1999, p. 4). From this, "the transition to kindergarten is fundamentally a matter of establishing a relationship between the home and the school in which the child's development is the key focus or goal" (Pianta, Rimm-Kaufman, & Cox, 1999, p. 4). This model draws on the work of Bronfenbrenner (see, for example, Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998) and others in describing ways in which children influence the contexts in which they live and the ways in which those contexts also affect experiences.

The ecological model reflects the findings of our own research and provides a structure for investigating relevant issues, such as an individual child's perceived readiness for school, the impact of community resources on transition programs, the role of screening procedures for children about to start school, and the importance of bilingual programs. Considering the context of the transition to school enables us to reflect upon the changes within that context over time and the implications of these changes. For example, as home and school contexts come together, the relationship between early childhood educators and parents is highlighted. Some forms of relationships seem particularly conducive to children experiencing success at school, and others do not (Birch & Ladd, 1997). Just as changes in relationships between early childhood educators and parents can have an impact on children, changes in children can have an impact on relationships. A model that recognizes this fact provides a powerful tool for analyzing the complexity of the situation.

The Starting School Research Project

In New South Wales (NSW), Australia, the school year commences in late January and finishes in early December. The age by which children are legally required to start school is 6 years. However, children are eligible to start school at the beginning of the school year if they turn 5 by July 31 in that same year. A child whose birthday falls after this cut-off date starts school the following year. Because there is only one annual intake of students, children starting school can vary in age from 4-1/2 to 6 years. The first year of school, kindergarten, involves a full-day program operating throughout school terms. In some schools, kindergarten students finish school 30 minutes prior to other students, at least for the first term.

The Starting School Research Project, based at the University of Western Sydney, involves a group of researchers and a wide ranging Advisory Committee representing major early childhood organizations, early childhood employer groups, parent associations, school organizations, community, and union perspectives (Dockett, Howard, & Perry, 1999). Over the past three years, the project has investigated the

perceptions and expectations of all those involved in young children's transition to school.

The initial phase of the project consisted of interviews with groups of children, parents, and early childhood educators—in both school and prior-to-school settings—to determine what is important to each of these groups as children start school. From these interviews and a detailed review of the relevant literature, an extensive questionnaire was developed. Over the period 1998-2000, this questionnaire was distributed to parents and early childhood educators across NSW (Perry, Dockett, & Howard, 2000; Perry, Dockett, & Tracey, 1998).

Together, the interviews and questionnaire responses have enabled the project team to describe the most important issues for children, parents, and educators as children start school. A series of categories of responses was devised using grounded theory that reflected the issues raised by respondents. These categories related to (1) the *knowledge* children needed to have in order to start school, (2) elements of *social adjustment* required in the transition to school, (3) specific *skills* children needed to have mastered, (4) *dispositions* conducive to a successful start to school, (5) the *rules* of school, (6) *physical* aspects of starting school, (7) *family issues,* and (8) the nature of the *educational environment* within school (Dockett & Perry, 1999b). A confirmatory factor analysis and review of national and international literature supported these categories. As an overview of the responses for different groups, the ranking of each category, from most to least mentioned, is listed in Table 1.

Table 1
Overview of Categories and Response Groups

Children	Parents	Early Childhood Educators
Rules	Social Adjustment	Social Adjustment
Disposition	Educational Environment	Disposition
Social Adjustment	Disposition	Skills
Knowledge	Physical	Educational Environment
Physical	Family	Physical
Skills	Skills	Knowledge
	Rules	Family
	Knowledge	Rules

The focus of this paper is the way in which these responses have been used to develop a series of guidelines that promote effective transition to school, rather than on the results themselves. However, it is of relevance to give a brief overview of the results and the ways in which these have informed the development of the guidelines.

One key result is that what the adults—parents and educators involved in the transition to school—considered important varied considerably from what the children considered important. For example, we have reported (Dockett & Perry, 1999b) that young children

focus mainly on the rules they need to know in order to function at school, as well as how they feel about going to school (dispositions). Important in the latter category is the presence of friends and the expectation that school is a place to be with friends and to make friends.

Parents and early childhood educators, on the other hand, have emphasized the importance of children adjusting socially to the school environment. While parents and early childhood educators generally agreed that social adjustment was the most important factor in a child's transition to school, they emphasized different aspects of social adjustment. For early childhood educators, social adjustment involved children being able to operate as part of a large group, through sharing the teacher's attention, demonstrating independence as required, and being able to follow directions. Parents emphasized the importance of their children adjusting to other adults in an unfamiliar setting, through aspects such as being able to separate easily from the parent and join the teacher in class, and being able to interact and respond appropriately with nonfamilial adults. Parents were also concerned about the two-way nature of that interaction. A common question asked by parents was "Will the teacher like my child?" On one hand, parents were keen for their child to adjust to school and to "fit in" to the classroom. On the other hand, they were anxious that someone would appreciate the "specialness" of their child, and that someone would come to know and appreciate their child in a positive and responsive way (Dockett & Perry, 1999a).

Few respondents indicated that children's knowledge was a major issue in starting school. The group that mentioned knowledge most often was the children, with some commenting quite strongly that they could not start school until they could write their name or count to 10. Early childhood educators generally expressed the attitude that "we can teach them to write their name, but it's more important to have kids who can function in the classroom." Parents, too, were not overly concerned about the knowledge that children took with them to school. Of greater concern to them was whether or not they had chosen the optimal educational environment for their child.

Project Themes

The perspectives and experiences of children, parents, and early childhood educators have helped to shape some strong themes that underpin continuing aspects of the project. The first is a belief and commitment that starting school is not just an experience for the individual child. Rather, it is a community experience, involving a wide range of people. In addition to the child, the family and the community in which the family lives are involved. Educators in prior-to-school settings have an important role to play, and all school staff—not just the kindergarten teacher—are crucial to the effectiveness of the transition experience. In other words, starting school is a community issue and a community responsibility. When communities work together and when children realize that they have the support of groups within their respective communities, starting school can be a positive and exciting experience.

The second theme is that effective transition programs focus on relationships. While it can be important for children to possess and demonstrate some specific skills and knowledge, their ability to form meaningful relationships is crucial to their successful transition and influential in their later school careers (Ladd, Birch, & Buhs, 1999). The nature of relationships between and among children, families, peers, and early childhood

educators has a significant impact on children's sense of belonging and acceptance within a school community. In situations where positive relationships had been established between families and schools, children, and teachers (and between educators in prior-to-school settings and schools), children, parents, and early childhood educators reported positive feelings about the transition to school. Where such relationships were not in evidence, hesitations, anxieties, and concerns prevailed.

It is generally the case that children who experience similar environments and expectations at home and school are likely to find the transition to school, as well as school in general, easier (Nelson, 1995). The converse also holds: that is, children who find school unfamiliar and unrelated to their home contexts tend to experience difficulty, confusion, and anxiety during the transition—particularly when the cultures in the home and school differ (Toomey, 1989). Effective transition programs that respect the different perspectives and expectations that converge when children start school and aim to develop an effective partnership between all involved can provide a vital connection.

Both of these themes reflect a broad view of transition experiences. In this view, there is recognition that there are many contributors to transition experiences and that the perspectives and expectations of each of these contributors shape those experiences in some way. For example, we know that children starting school bring with them a wide array of experiences and understandings. As a result, they experience the transition to school in different ways (Rimm-Kaufman, Cox, & Pianta, 1998). Similarly, early childhood educators and parents have varying expectations about the transition to school (Dockett & Perry, 1999a). Other factors, such as the amount and nature of family support for children starting school, teacher expectations about children, families and parent involvement (Entwisle, 1995), as well as children's expectations of school (Brostrom, 1995; Christensen, 1998) all have a significant impact on transition experiences and the ways in which these are provided and interpreted.

Guidelines for Effective Transition to School Programs

It is with this background that the *Guidelines for Effective Transition to School Programs* have been developed. The guidelines have been through several iterations, both at research forums and in extensive discussions with the Starting School Advisory Committee (Dockett, Perry, & Howard, 2000). Recognizing that effective transition programs are contextually relevant, the guidelines are not prescriptive. There is no sense that all schools or communities should have the same transition program. Rather, the expectation is that there are many ways to implement the different guidelines, and these different strategies should be encouraged as groups of people develop programs that are relevant, meaningful, and appropriate within their own community. The aim of the guidelines is to provide a framework for developing and evaluating transition programs. The guidelines (Dockett, Perry, & Howard, 2000) argue that effective transition-to-school programs:

- establish positive relationships between the children, parents, and educators;
- facilitate each child's development as a capable learner;
- differentiate between "orientation-to-school" and "transition-to-school" programs;
- draw upon dedicated funding and resources;
- involve a range of stakeholders;

- are well planned and effectively evaluated;
- are flexible and responsive;
- are based on mutual trust and respect;
- rely on reciprocal communication among participants;
- take into account contextual aspects of community and of individual families and children within that community.

Using the Guidelines

During 2000-2001, members of the Starting School research team have been working with groups of parents and educators, and sometimes children, in 15 different locations across NSW. The aim of these groups is to bring together members of the community who are interested, and who have a role to play, in children's transition to school, to reflect on current practice in transition, and to use the guidelines to develop, implement, and evaluate contextually relevant transition-to-school programs. Within these locations, there is coverage of inner-urban, suburban, rural, and isolated communities; low, middle, and high socioeconomic status; non-English-speaking communities; Aboriginal communities; and services relating to the special needs of young children and their families. The range of school and prior-to-school services in each location varies considerably. However, the sample covers the full range of school services—government, Catholic, independent, distance education, disadvantaged schools—and prior-to-school services—long day care, family day care, preschool, mobile services, and distance education.

In the next section of this paper, we provide the theoretical basis for the guidelines, connections with the categories described earlier in the paper, and some examples of the ways in which the guidelines have been implemented by the working groups in different locations. The examples are by no means exhaustive. Rather they are used to illustrate some of the potential applications of the guidelines.

1. Effective transition programs establish positive relationships between the children, parents, and educators.

Effective programs are based on the establishment and maintenance of relationships between all parties: educators, parents, and children. While transition programs may focus on developing children's knowledge, understanding, and skills, they have, as their key function, a commitment to facilitating positive social interactions and relationships. Effective transition programs encourage all participants to regard themselves, and their co-participants, as valued members of the school community.

Interviews with children have indicated that they place great importance on friends, and having friends, at school. Starting school was regarded as a chance to make "different friends" by "talking and playing nice to them." Children described liking school because they could "make up lots and lots of friends" and, conversely, described school as a sad place to be "when nobody would be a friend."

Some schools have introduced "buddy" programs, where children in the upper years of primary school are paired with children starting school. Buddies typically spend a lot of time together in the first few weeks of school, in the playground, and sometimes in integrated classroom experiences. In one school, year 5 buddies joined the kindergarten

children for class play sessions, as well as during lunch and recess times. Teachers also have responded to children's focus on friends by planning time within their programs for small group and other experiences that provide opportunities for children to get to know each other and to make friends.

Relationships between and among all participants in the transition to school are important. Some schools provide opportunities for parents to meet when they take their children to school for the first time, some prior-to-school services arrange informal meetings among families whose children will be attending the same school, and some educators in prior-to-school and school settings meet on a regular basis to consider ways to promote continuity between settings.

Many parents appreciated opportunities to meet other parents, as well as teachers. However, not all parents reported positive experiences. Some described a sense of alienation as their child started school—particularly some parents who had been actively involved in the management of prior-to-school services and who then felt "shut-out" by the school administrative processes. One parent was dismayed that she "had been the treasurer of the preschool committee, used to dropping in as she needed, but now had to make an appointment to see her child's teacher."

Just as important are the relationships that exist among teachers in schools. School principals who value the work of their kindergarten teachers and support them in many ways have an important role to play in establishing the first year of school as an important one within the school community.

2. Effective transition programs facilitate each child's development as a capable learner.

Effective transition programs recognize the growth, development, and learning that has occurred before the child starts school as well as the impact of the child's environment on these. Effective transition programs recognize the role of the family and other educators and seek to collaborate in ways that build upon the child's experiences. Children are recognized as capable learners who bring with them a vast array of learning experiences and expectations, which may, or may not, reflect the knowledge, skills, and understandings reflected in the school environment.

While knowledge and skills did not rate in the survey or interviews as highly important when children start school, children clearly have constructed a great deal of knowledge and understanding, and acquired a great many skills, before they start school. The low rating of knowledge and skills does not necessarily imply that they do not matter. Rather, comments indicate that these can be taught at school in an effective manner, if other aspects of the starting school experience have been positive.

Many teachers in schools are keen to find out what children know and can do, and to use this information to guide curriculum within the first year of school. With parental permission, educators from prior-to-school settings and schools can meet to discuss any potential issues related to transition. The knowledge gained can be invaluable when children start school. In several areas, teachers in schools try to get to know the children and their families before they start school. Teachers can meet with children and their families through informal gatherings, such as welcome barbeques, or through visits to

prior-to-school services. In one location, the kindergarten teacher spends some of her teaching release time each week visiting a local preschool and reading to the children. When the preschool children then start school, they see a familiar face. The teacher also has some background knowledge of the children, the issues they have addressed in preschool, and, in this case, their literacy interests.

3. Effective transition programs differentiate between "orientation-to-school" and "transition-to-school" programs.

Orientation programs are designed to help children and parents become familiar with the school setting. They may involve a tour of the school, meeting relevant people in the school, and spending some time in a classroom. Orientation programs are characterized by presentations by the school to the parents and children.

Transition programs may include an orientation time but tend to be longer term and more geared to the individual needs of children and families than orientation programs. Transition programs can be of indeterminate length, depending on a particular child or parent's needs. They recognize that starting school is a time of transition for all involved: children, families, and educators. Transition programs may be planned and implemented by a team of people representing all those involved in the change.

Opportunities to visit the school and to spend time with others at the school are important to children. Some children indicated that they started school on the day of their orientation, even if they had spent only a few hours at the school. Parents placed emphasis on getting to know the school and the school's expectations as they aimed to help prepare their children for school. Teachers too emphasized the value of programs that helped them to get to know children and parents they would be working with the following year. Most expressed a preference for ongoing transition, rather than orientation, programs.

Orientation and transition programs vary widely. Those reported by parents to be most effective for them and their children involve much more than a walk around the school and a talk from the principal about what is expected at the school. Of value to parents was the chance to ask questions, discuss issues, and generally find out how school had changed since their own schooldays. The most effective strategy was to have several sessions, involving small groups of parents and children. As well, parents who had a chance to observe their child in a school setting felt that they were better equipped to make decisions about whether or not the child was "ready" to start school. Teachers also reported a similar view. Parent groups at schools are often involved in these programs. In one instance, parents designed and implemented a survey of other parents, seeking reactions to transition programs. Their results will feed back into the planning of future transition programs.

Programs vary according to the context—for example, some schools invite parents to sessions in the evenings, as a way of catering for working parents, and others provide child care for younger children during the day, so that parents can attend the program with the child who is about to start school.

Several schools have promoted parent involvement in transition programs. However, there are few examples of children having any input into transition programs. Some

innovative possibilities to explore include inviting children who are about to start school and those already at school to discuss issues they expect to face, or faced, when starting school and to seek their help in designing a program based on what they think new children to the school should know.

4. Effective transition programs draw upon dedicated funding and resources.

A range of resources is required for transition programs to function effectively. These include people, time, materials, and space in which to operate the program. Often, creative and collaborative approaches are used by staff in schools and prior-to-school settings to identify ways in which resources or funding can be used to support transition programs. Appropriate funding and resources may come from a number of sources.

Early childhood educators, in particular, have raised the issue of resourcing programs, reporting large amounts of organization occurring out of school hours and a sense of working alone to promote transition programs. Parents have reported both positive and negative reactions to programs and the associated resources. One parent reported feeling overwhelmed at her son's orientation, where the new group of 25 children and their parents had joined the existing class of 25 children in a rather small classroom: "The crush, the noise, was overwhelming for me, let alone J. And all because the school didn't have another room we could use." Other parents have appreciated a chance to move around schoolrooms and playgrounds as a way of seeing what the school offers. In one program, children "felt special" when they were issued a T-shirt as part of their transition package.

The injection of money into programs is a rare, yet welcomed, occurrence. It signifies to the community the worth and value of transition programs. Financial and other resources are essential to release staff from teaching responsibilities in order for them to visit schools and prior-to-school settings and to provide support for transition programs. The effective management of resources is often the key to an effective transition program. In one location, an impressive coordination of resources has meant that children who are about to start preschool visit the center on the same day that children from the preschool visit the school they will be attending the following year. In each location, the "new" children have a chance to experience the environment without being overwhelmed by the children who are already in attendance. Further, the educators in both settings are able to concentrate on the needs of the "new" children.

5. Effective transition programs involve a range of stakeholders.

Educators, parents, and children should have input into the program. Educators from prior-to-school settings as well as teachers of kindergarten and other grades and school staff, such as community languages teachers, librarians, staff of the out-of-school-hours program, support/clerical staff, and general staff, can all make valuable contributions to a transition program. Parents know their children well and can provide a great deal of valuable input to a transition program. Young children too can make a significant contribution as they indicate areas of interest or concern. Educators in prior-to-school settings also know the children well. They may have developed comprehensive records as part of their planning process and often have become trusted friends of the parents and the child in the years before school. Further, in some contexts, members of the broader community may be involved with the program.

Some of the most positive descriptions of starting school experiences came from those involved in collaborative programs. Parents described being pleasantly surprised that prior-to-school educators and school teachers would work together on programs and reported their children's sense of amazement when the two sets of early childhood educators were seen working together.

Effective transition programs do not rely on one individual. Rather, they involve, at the least, parents, children, and educators. Ideally, there are connections between prior-to-school and school settings as well. Involving a range of people does not mean that they all do the same thing. In some situations, parents with particular skills and abilities use these to great effect in transition programs—for example, writing newsletters to other parents, facilitating discussions, or spending time with individual children. In one rural location, the involvement of the bus driver has had a major impact on the transition program, with parents, children, and teachers now feeling much more comfortable about the time children spend on the bus traveling to and from school. Many children will spend several hours on the bus each day, and a comfortable relationship with the bus driver makes this experience more pleasant. Similarly, staff who work in out-of-school-hours care indicate that involvement with transition programs helps them get to know children and families and also to work with others in a consistent way.

Different communities will have different stakeholders who could be involved in the transition to school. In some indigenous communities, it is vital that the programs have the involvement of elders or other respected members of the community.

6. Effective transition programs are well planned and effectively evaluated.

Effective transition programs are based on detailed planning and have clearly defined objectives that have been developed in collaboration with all of the stakeholders. The effectiveness of the program is assessed in relation to these objectives. It is important that stakeholders have opportunities to be involved at all levels of planning, implementation, and evaluation and that their perspectives be accepted.

Children, parents, and early childhood educators have different views about effective transition-to-school programs. Attaining a sense of working together involves spending some time establishing what is important within a particular community or context and then working towards that goal. Parents of children with special learning needs report that long-term planning, focusing on the establishment of realistic and appropriate aims, is a valuable part of any transition program. Parents and early childhood educators also indicated that they appreciated the opportunity to evaluate programs. Children also provided some useful feedback about the programs they attended. This feedback ranged from the observation that "teachers yell" to the comment that "I think school is better than preschool because there's so many people and space for all of them."

Planning and evaluation can take many forms. In some settings, a short but intensive period is used to plan the program; in other settings, planning occurs over several terms. Collaborative relationships often take time to develop, but once in place, these relationships can provide the basis of an effective planning group over the longer term. Evaluating programs is essential, both in establishing the credibility of the programs and

in demonstrating the value of programs to the wider community. It is important to agree on the types of data to be reported and to use these data appropriately. Examples of data that could be used to inform decisions about the program include (1) children's comments and drawings; (2) parent surveys and comments; (3) indications of children's well-being at school, such as attendance patterns, interactions, and familiarity and comfort in the environment; (4) teachers' reactions; and (5) observations. Data can be documented in many ways, including photographs of children/parents/teachers at school, children's drawings or constructions, recordings of children's narratives, and letters from parents. As important as the information that is recorded is the way it is interpreted and used. In any planning and evaluation, it is important to consider the perspectives of all those involved, rather than to interpret the information through one lens only.

7. Effective transition programs are flexible and responsive.

Well-planned programs can be responsive to the changing needs and interests of participants. As each of the participants gets to know the others better, needs will change and areas of interest and concern will emerge. Effective programs recognize that flexible means are required to involve different groups of people.

One of the concerns raised consistently by parents related to their role at school. Many were familiar with what was expected at preschool or day care but were unsure of what their role could be in the school setting. Some were concerned that they could not get to school during the day, and their absence would be taken as a sign of disinterest. Others were worried that they may not be able to help children with homework. Schools attempted to alleviate these concerns when they organized meetings in ways that were flexible and responsive, both in their timing and in the issues covered throughout the program.

Many people within communities are keen for their children to succeed at school, but they find it difficult themselves to access the school. This difficulty may arise because of their own negative memories of school, because they work hours that prevent them getting to the school during the day, because they live some distance from the school and either do not have transport or the time to travel to the school on a regular basis, or for many other reasons. It cannot be assumed that these people have no interest in the school or no interest in supporting their children as they start school. Effective transition programs respect these differences and respond to them in a flexible manner.

One example of such flexibility and responsiveness can be drawn from one relatively isolated community. For families in outlying areas of this community, access to preschool involves a mobile preschool setting up in the local area, at most one day every two weeks. Parents often asked staff from the mobile preschool about their child's readiness for school. Each of these families had limited means of comparing their child with others and were seeking some reassurance that the children would be successful at school. In response to this concern, some parents, preschool staff, and other early childhood educators—including school teachers—prepared a brochure outlining some of the things parents could do with their children to help prepare them for school. They were keen to avoid a checklist of skills and focused more on the types of interactions and experiences that would help children feel comfortable at school.

8. Effective transition programs are based on mutual trust and respect.

Where programs evolve and operate in a climate of trust, and where the perspectives of all participants are respected, open communication is likely to develop. A climate of trust and respect enables all involved to feel valued within the school community. Just as children function best in situations where they feel safe—psychologically as well as physically—adults who feel their ideas and views will be listened to are likely to contribute to the program in significant ways.

In interviews, children described a gamut of feelings as they started school. They also expressed great trust in teachers who took the time to listen to their concerns. For example, Joanne described feeling "a bit embarrassed" at starting school because there were "too many people standing around looking" at her. She felt much better in the classroom when she could talk with the teacher and the teacher could respond to her.

Trust and respect are conveyed in many ways. Being prepared to listen to alternative points of view is an important start to this process: Educators, families, and children all need to feel trusted and respected. In several transition programs, a great deal of effort has gone into promoting a climate of trust and respect among prior-to-school educators and teachers in schools. Despite early childhood educators being employed in both settings, often with the same training, there is a definite gulf between the two sectors. In NSW, this situation is exemplified by educators in most prior-to-school settings being responsible to one government department and teachers in the early years of school being employed by another.

Where transition programs involve educators from both settings, and where there is clear respect for what the other does, meaningful professional relationships can exist. In some instances, such respect has been built up through ongoing contact. This contact has involved visiting the different settings, sharing information as appropriate, involving staff from both settings in professional development programs, and the like. One concrete example of where such trust is beneficial is in the transfer of information about individual children from one setting to another. With parental permission, teachers in schools can learn a lot about a child by accessing relevant information held by staff in prior-to-school settings. However, for this strategy to be meaningful, teachers in schools and educators in prior-to-school settings must have a relationship of trust and respect built upon an acceptance of the professionalism of both groups.

9. Effective transition programs rely on reciprocal communication among participants.

Open and reciprocal communication among children, parents, and early childhood educators is an important element of effective programs. Reciprocal communication recognizes that parents, as well as educators, know a great deal about the children in their care. Children too know a lot about themselves, how they learn, and how they respond in certain situations. Collaboration based on open communication establishes a context where the educational needs of the child are uppermost in the minds of all involved. Communication between staff of schools and prior-to-school settings is also valuable but must be guided by legal as well as ethical considerations as to what information about children and families may be shared.

Often, children are eager to be involved in meaningful communication about school. Adults need to be prepared to engage in reciprocal communication with children, and to

expect that this experience can be worthwhile for themselves as well as the children. In one instance, Brett shared his concerns about starting school, where he expected that "a boy might push me over on the cement. When you are at school, they might push you over because you are little and they hurt you." Recognizing that these concerns are real and responding appropriately provide the basis for reciprocal communication.

Avenues for two-way communication in many communities will be enhanced through the involvement of bilingual educators, parents, and, sometimes, children. The languages and cultures of the community in which the school is located need to be reflected in the group responsible for the transition program.

Sometimes it is easy to recall examples of miscommunication rather than effective communication among those involved in starting school. However, even a focus on these negatives can highlight the value of reciprocal communication. This form of communication is integral to several of the other guidelines. For example, it is most likely to occur in a context of mutual trust and respect, and where positive relationships exist.

Effective transition programs rely on two-way communication—that is, more than the school sending home letters about what should happen and more than families only interacting with staff at the school when a problem is perceived. While newsletters and notice-boards can be useful, they promote one-way, rather than reciprocal, communication. In one effective transition program, reciprocal communication was promoted by the involvement of a bilingual community worker. This person had credibility in the local community and was able to facilitate discussions between teachers and parents about relevant issues.

10. Effective transition programs take into account contextual aspects of community and of individual families and children within that community.

A contextual framework focuses attention on the ways in which children are influenced by, and in turn influence, the context in which they exist. In this framework, the responsibility to become "ready" for school rests not with the individual child but with a community.

The contexts in which children live are influenced by issues such as socioeconomic status, geographical isolation, cultural diversity, parental work patterns, language backgrounds, disability, and other special needs. While it is important that this diversity is reflected at a general level in the transition program, it is imperative that differences among individuals and individual families within each community are recognized and valued for the richness they bring.

Given the diversity of contexts and relevant issues and interactions within these, we should see a diversity of transition programs in the project's research sites. While several of the issues identified by each of the working groups are similar, the ways in which they choose to respond to these differ considerably. For example, 8 of the 15 groups have identified communication between educators in prior-to-school and school settings as an area they would like to strengthen. The ways in which they have chosen to pursue this same issue include (1) arranging meetings at different venues so that educators can become familiar with the different settings, (2) having informal discussions after school

hours, (3) spending teaching release time in different settings, and (4) writing to educators individually to share information. We regard the facility to design a program that reflects the context in which it occurs as essential to the success of transition programs.

Problematizing Transition

The current focus of the Starting School Research Project is working with different community groups to evaluate and strengthen transition-to-school programs across the state. It is rewarding to be involved with groups of people who have a strong commitment to the well-being of young children and their families as they start school. It is also challenging to encourage people to move beyond the expectations and some of the taken-for-granted practices—that is, to problematize transition. Through the process of questioning what we know and how we know it, we can come to reconceptualize practices that seem to be taken for granted (MacNaughton, 2000).

Two theoretical issues have emerged from the working groups: the trend to consider transition programs in terms of skills and abilities, and the curriculum of transition. The first of these is the focus on readiness for school as a series of isolated skills and abilities. It is quite easy to buy books detailing lists of skills that children should be able to demonstrate in order to be "ready for school" and to form the impression that children who cannot do any or all of these should not be sent to school. This focus is reiterated in the requests to the project team from parent groups, schools, and prior-to-school settings to talk with groups about getting children ready for school and to talk about how children's readiness for school can be addressed. It should be noted that in NSW, there is no schedule to assess children's school readiness and no requirement that any such assessment be completed. The only children for whom assessment is advised are children who are entering school on the basis of giftedness or special learning needs. One consequence has been that some schools and prior-to-school services develop their own checklists that tend to list easily measurable skills in isolation.

There is no doubt that some skills and abilities make the transition to school easier for all concerned, and we are in no sense saying that these should not be learned or demonstrated at some time. However, our research indicates that children, parents, and early childhood educators are more concerned about social issues, such as adjustment and relationships, and ways in which these can be promoted. As well as the anecdotal evidence about the benefits of "feeling like you belong" in a particular context, having a sense that "you are valued" and "your views are respected," there is growing research evidence that successful transitions to school are based substantially on social skills (Ladd, Birch, & Buhs, 1999; McClelland, Morrison, & Holmes, 2000) and facilitated by a series of responsive relationships.

The second issue relates to the curriculum of transition. Traditionally, there has been a sense that it is the responsibility of the school to induct children into the ways of the school. Our ongoing work with groups leads us to challenge this assumption and place the responsibility for transition programs in the broader community rather than with the school alone. There is no doubt that schools should be involved in transition programs and maybe even play the leading role; however, many people outside the school also have a major influence on the ways in which children participate in school and

school-related experiences. These groups include the children themselves, family and friends, educators in prior-to-school settings, health professionals, community workers, and community elders. No doubt many other groups have significant contributions to make in different contexts. In many instances, members of these groups have already formed relationships with the child and know a great deal about the child and his or her interests and abilities.

This view recognizes that dispositions, values, feelings, attitudes, and understandings are equally as important as skills and knowledge. For example, both adult and child participants in transition have identified positive dispositions about school as one of the key factors in a successful transition to school (Dockett & Perry, 1999a). If children learn dispositions from being around people who hold similar dispositions (Katz & Chard, 1987), then it is important that all involved in transition experiences reflect the positive aspects of starting school. They are likely to do so when they are actively involved in transition experiences or where their views have been sought and considered in the planning of transition experiences. The entire community benefits when children want to be at school, regard school as valuable, and experience school success.

In promoting transition programs that focus on relationships and extend beyond the school gate, we believe it is essential that the views and perspectives of children are considered. It can be tempting to regard children as the recipients of transition programs rather than as active participants who are shaped by and who shape the experiences. One of the aims of the Starting School Research Project is to reject the view that transition programs happen to children. We believe that children can and do make valuable contributions to transition programs and that listening to their views, responding to their challenges, and respecting their existing understandings can be an educational experience for all concerned.

Conclusion

In each of the research sites, members of the research team report that the *Guidelines for Effective Transition to School Programs* provide a sound basis for discussion and that this discussion supports the underlying themes of these guidelines: that positive and responsive relationships are vital to successful transitions and that effective transitions involve communities of individuals rather than individuals in communities.

The opportunity to work with diverse groups of people in different settings and contexts has enabled both the research team and those involved in the location groups to question some of the assumptions underlying transition programs and to work through these issues. The solutions and strategies that emerge from these interactions will continue to vary as each group grapples with the idiosyncrasies of their contexts. As the location groups continue to examine and evaluate their transition-to-school programs, we look forward to investigating the many and varied ways in which children, families, educators, and the broader community can benefit from their membership in school communities.

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